

**Offsetting Penalties
Galatians 2: 15-21
June 17th, 2007
Rev. Steve McCoy
First United Methodist Church
Marquette, MI**

In football, when two players on opposite teams commit a penalty on the same play you here this phrase: “Both penalties offset. Replay the down.” Growing up we had a term that perhaps you may have used too, “Do over.” Whatever term you use, it means basically everyone messed up. You can’t blame one or the other, so lets forget it happened and start over.

Sisters and brothers this is what God says and is saying to us in Jesus Christ. Your penalty has not only offset but it is forgiven. It is like it never happened in God’s eyes. But we can also fall into a trap. The trap that says that from the time we are a Christian onward we are supposed to be perfect people. Shiny Happy Christians holding hands. But we know that we are also human. There are those who believe

that a clear set of rules must be strictly adhered to in order to make sure that we are in line with what it is that God wants.

But even the most practiced of Christians is not perfect even if it is the goal we are striving after. We know that, yet in the same time we do not always necessarily live that way.

We're not sure of the original source of this story, but it bears repeating:

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea. With no thought for their safety they went out day and night, tirelessly rescuing the lost. Many lives were saved, so the station became famous.

Some of those who were saved, along with others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the

station. They gave of their time, money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought, new crews were trained, and the lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt a more comfortable place should be provided, so they replaced the emergency cots and beds and put better furniture in a new, larger building.

Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members. They decorated it exquisitely because they used it as sort of a club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do the work.

The lifesaving motif still prevailed in the club's decorations, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where club

initiations were held. About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in loads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick. The beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where the shipwreck victims could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the lifesaving activity because they thought it was a hindrance and unpleasant to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted on lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out they were still a lifesaving station after all. They were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of various kinds of people shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast, which they did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that coast today, you'll find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent, but most of the people drown.

Is the church today committed to saving people ... or not?¹

L. Gregory Jones writes in the latest edition of The Christian Century, about how Christians really do embrace the grace of God. Soon after his book *Embodying Forgiveness* was published he tells of a phone call he received a phone call from a woman in the state attorney general's office who wanted to know if Christians really cared about forgiveness.

¹ Homiletics *Cleaning House*

He said yes, noting that the issues are complicated and it is difficult to learn how to embody forgiveness well.

“After explaining that she was a lifelong churchgoer, but she had just about given up on the Christian faith and Christians. When he asked why she responded that she was responsible for transitioning people from prison back into society. She had worked with a wide variety of prisoners, and many were genuinely repentant and wanted to learn how to live constructively in society. But when she contacted churches throughout her state to ask them to host these ex-prisoners as they reentered society, she was turned down each time. She acknowledged the legitimate concerns and fears that people have, but given how quickly people cut off her overtures, she wondered: Do Christians even care?”²

² Jones, L. Gregory *Call-in Confessions*. The Christian Century, June 12, 2007 p. 31.

Paul one could imagine, was asking the same thing as he is writing to the Galatians in chapter 2. He has been working so hard for the faith building the church and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to the gentiles, and here he is in a legalistic battle over what a true Christian is. To further their case they question his own integrity and his own past to justify that theirs is the right way. Paul emphasizes the importance of living that new life, but even so, neither he nor anybody can nullify the grace of God. Is Christ a servant of sin, he asks? Certainly not! We are not justified by what we do or what we have done but we are justified by the grace of Jesus Christ. Through our belief in Christ we can die to our old selves and live for him. Yet the Galatians had reverted back to a legalism, that lead Paul to ask: “Do you even care?”

What Paul goes on to explain is that the penalties are offset by the grace of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ,

yet further God's grace cannot be nullified. We cannot do anything that earns this grace, but when we live in that grace we understand that it is we, who are transformed. But if we follow the works of the law then in fact we ourselves who are the transgressors.

Paul is ultimately talking about what God has done for us in Christ is a world transforming experience, not just life transforming. One penalty or offsetting penalties can effect the outcome of a game, so too does Christ faithfulness effect the out come of the world. As Richard Hayes says, "What he has does for us is not merely to enable us to believe and thereby find individual forgiveness of sins. Instead, his faithful death has created a whole new world and liberated us from bondage to powers that once held us captive."³

³ Hayes, Richard B., *Galatians*, New Interpreters Bible, Vol. XI (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) 247.

So what does it all mean. It means that we have Christ living in us do not nor cannot do anything to counteract the grace of God. We can choose not to accept it, but we also are not to become so legalistic so as the works become the grace. Instead, the grace that dwells within us compels us to do the works of mercy. We are transformed, the old self is gone and there is a new self that is shaped by the holy spirit in the person of Jesus Christ. The old life is gone, the penalties offset, and there is new life in Christ that through us effects the outcome of the whole world. Amen.